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ABSTRACT

Asserting that previous studies of latchkey children had several methodological flaws, this 4-year study explored children's after-school lives, when their parents are working. Participating in the study were 53 families in which parents were employed full-time and which had at least one child in elementary school; families came from a wide range of socioeconomic/ethnic backgrounds and family structures. Data were collected by means of annual individual interviews with mothers, fathers, and children. The findings indicated that after-school needs had a substantial impact on parents' work lives. Influences on after-school arrangements included respondents' memories of childhood, children's needs, cost, and logistics. Arrangements included relatives as caregivers, paid sitters, after-school programs, and public libraries. Children's desire for spontaneity and freedom worked against after-school programs. At the study's inception, adult supervision was the norm for most children. Over the course of the study, all but 3 children had some unsupervised care, with self-care beginning at age 10 to 11. Some children slipped into unsupervised arrangements without parental knowledge. Stressful after-school challenges were more frequent when children were unsupervised than when supervised, and included loneliness, fear, temptations to relax/ignore household rules, boredom, wasting time, and finding meaning in the way the children spent their time. There was enormous variation in social supports available to children during after-school hours. It was difficult to separate the impact of after-school arrangements from the impact of life circumstances that helped create those arrangements. Girls, more often than boys, sought out social support, were satisfied with social support received, and strongly identified with parents. (Contains approximately 140 references.) (KB)

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